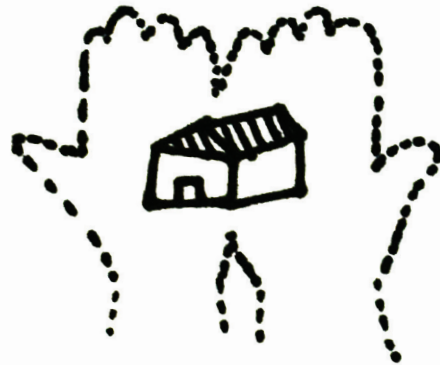INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ R. MENÉNDEZ

Small Print, Small Place, But Nothing is Small

Can you provide a little intro of who you are and what you define your profession?

My name is José r. Menéndez. I'm an Assistant Professor at Northeastern University, the College of Art, Media and Design. My work delves into the intersection between graphic design, landscape architecture, and marine science.

I'm also a co-founder and a partner at Buena Gráfica Social Studio with Tatiana Gómez. Tatiana is an Associate Professor at MassArt in the Communication Design Department. We met at RISD when we were both getting our graduate degree in graphic design. Eventually we got married.
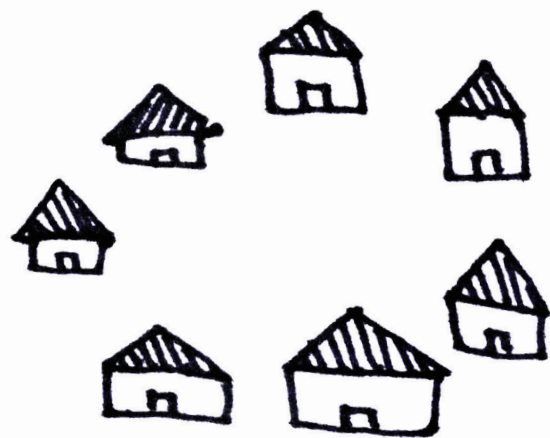
Can you share more about what kind of work you do in Buena Gráfica Social Studio?

Buena Gráfica is a platform we use to work with the Providence and regional community. We develop our practice together, but our different specialties allow our work to take many forms. Tati focuses a lot on typography and book design, and I have a background in spatial design. We take on traditional projects like visual identity, booklets, posters, websites, and communication design strategies, but it also branches out to community engagement, public art and wayfinding projects.

Our communication systems take on many different forms, but printing is something we always come back to. We love printing because it's a powerful way to bring people together. Me and Tatiana actually met through letterpress, as it is always a meaningful way to understand graphic design. We eventually decided to get letterpress and have used it to host workshops with organizations, often for team building. In almost every project, we try to include

some kind of print piece, whether it's a postcard or a poster. There's no such thing as a "small" print. All printed materials can be powerful tools for communication and community engagement.

I notice most of the studio's clients are in the realm of non-profit in Providence, can you tell us more about how the studio started and how you connected with these organizations?

The studio was formed around 2021. At the time, I was living at AS220, which is a local nonprofit arts organization in Providence. They run workshops and provide residencies for artists. It was a great way to stay connected to Providence after school. I fell in love with the city: the scale, the proximity to the ocean, being able to walk everywhere.

AS220 helped me meet local artists and step outside that RISD bubble. After graduation, I wanted to stay in PVD and build a practice here.

I always wanted to start a design studio. I came to school later in life, after working as a landscape architect for about 10 years. I started RISD at 34, I'm 45 now. Going to grad school was about teaching, but also finding a new path. I always saw graphic design as a way to address communication issues in a place. You don't need to work in a museum or a big firm to practice graphic design. There's real need in communities, and that was what I wanted to respond to.

I started volunteering and getting to know organizations. Our first real print work was for the RISD Jewelry department. We made a publication that combined digital and print methods. Then we got involved with local bilingual campaigns during COVID. There was a clear need to communicate health information and reach

bilingual communities. That's really when the studio started, responding to community needs.

We began making risographs, posters, and small prints. I've always believed there's no such thing as a small project. Posters are still a powerful way to engage people and talk about issues. We've kept that belief at the core of our work.

Eventually, we collaborated with The Steel Yard, another local arts organization. They were interested in what we were doing and helped us think about how this studio could support nonprofits and grow into something more sustainable.

So the studio really began as a response rather than a business plan. We weren't chasing commercial work or trying to do big branding projects. We just wanted to use design to respond to what was happening around us. That included applying for grants, like with the Rhode Island Department of Health, and getting opportunities through word of mouth.

One of those opportunities was with a new charter middle school on the West Side. They needed outreach materials. At first, they said it was just a small thing, but we encouraged them to think bigger, in steps. That's how we've approached a lot of our work.

We focus on building relationships. That takes time, especially in a small city like Providence. Projects can grow over time, and so can trust. Many of our current clients have been with us for years. We've grown with them by listening, learning, and adapting. It's a different kind of practice, rooted in long-term community connection.
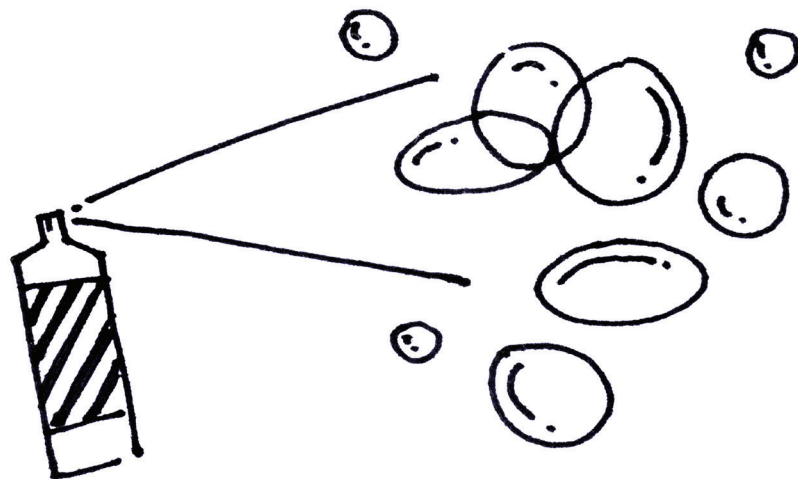
I love how you use the word "responsive" to describe how the studio started; it seems like you are always establishing this relationship not only as designer to client but also being connected to the local community.

Yeah, that's true. Our studio has always been responsive. There's a strong connection to the community. The connection is here not because we are working on a project, but because it existed before the job started. There's often a level of engagement that informs the entire process.

Because it is the two of us, we're involved in everything, from developing concepts to installing murals, banners, and exhibitions. Sometimes we work with close partners who help with production and installation, but often we install the work ourselves.

That's something I love about letterpress. Making a print means being in constant contact with the process. You're aligning materials, steps, and tools. What you're really creating is a workflow, and that's how we approach the studio too. We try to keep that process engaged and responsive.

It's also important to say that our studio is deeply tied to research. My main role is teaching at the university, and my partner Tatiana also teaches. So the studio becomes a platform for research and experimentation as much as for client work.

Running a studio like this involves juggling a lot: teaching, designing, organizing, and collaborating. It's a lot of work, and working with communities brings its own challenges, especially economic ones. But staying process-driven and connected helps keep it grounded.
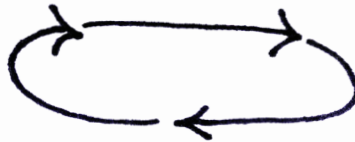
SMALL PRINT, SMALL PLACE, BUT NOTHING IS SMALL

I am curious about being a designer and researcher staying in the Providence area. have you noticed more clients asking for digital work lately? Or do you still find that print and physical workshops are a vital part for Providence's public communication?

That's a great question. Our practice has actually shifted more into public space like signage, wayfinding, and public art. That's been intentional on my part because that's the kind of work I want to do, but also here in Providence, people tend to come to us for community engagement and public-facing work.

It's a small place, but rich in creative networks. Our clients seek physical presence like murals, banners, and prints. Especially for post-COVID, when there's been a renewed interest in gathering and public expression. Most of the projects I'm working on now are centered around people: figuring out materials, sourcing, coordination. For some people Providence may be small, but I think it's incredibly diverse in creative talent. Everyone has their niche, and somehow you can always find someone with just the right knowledge.

There's a strong culture of printing here. This region has deep industrial roots—jewelry, manufacturing, trades—and a real reverence for craft. Even out in Western Massachusetts, there's a whole community of letterpress printers. There's actually a Museum of Printing nearby. It's tucked into a neighborhood and filled with old machines. That place is a reminder of how much history and knowledge is still present here. Just the fact that it   exists says something about   the culture.
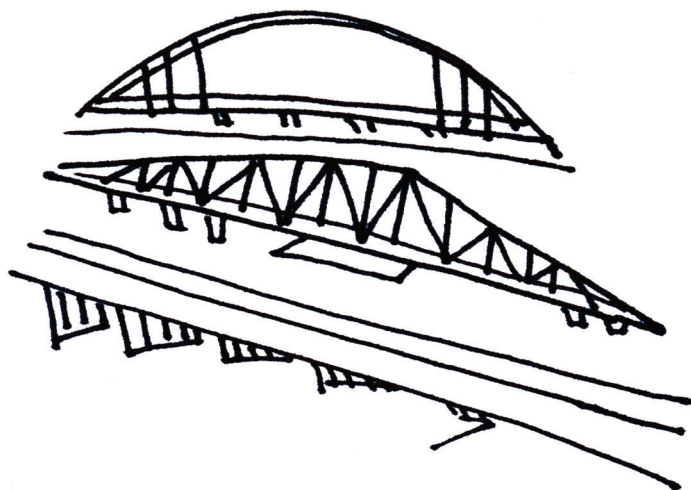
How do you see the more and more automated machines and technology is going to influence how you approach design right now?

I agree that there is a lot of discourse and challenges brought by the new technology, specifically with AI. But personally, I don't see it as a problem, at least not at this point. I haven't used it in my own work, though I know I probably will. I just see it as another tool that we'll have to learn to work with.

The important thing is how we build the process around it. How do we create workflows that let us use these technologies critically? The difference with AI is that it's not just an output, it's about decision-making, process-thinking. So yes, it can become more challenging in that sense. Unlike the letterpress, which helped you do your job, AI will replace some parts of it.

That's something we need to be thoughtful about. But I also think, as designers, our responsibility is to respond and to engage with the challenges, not run away from them.

That is really insightful. The real issue isn't just what AI can do, but how our structures are using it. It's a continuation of what happened in the industrial revolution. Back then, we were promised machines would free us from the alienated labor, but the current structure only intensified it. AI feels like a new version of that. As individuals, we often feel so small compared to that scale of machinery computation and the overall stress derived from it, and it's hard to know what we can actually do.

That feeling is very real. I remember when I was studying marine affairs at URI, learning about climate change, depleted ecosystems, and failing agriculture systems, all these systems-level problems. And I found myself writing about things that were just too big to comprehend in my day-to-day life. I'd ride the bus, make dinner, live my normal routine, but I was also immersed in these overwhelming global problems that felt out of reach. It made me feel helpless. And yes, I got depressed.

Eventually, I realized I needed to reverse the scale. I asked myself: what can I do at a local level? What small action can I take that's rooted in where I live, in who I'm connected to? Just because something is small doesn't mean it's insignificant. Human connection happens at small scales. Trust happens in small groups. Communication materials don't have to reach thousands to matter. They just have to reach the right people.

And often, those small-scale efforts grow organically. They're powerful because they're personal. That's why I value

working locally, with communities. This region has a deep history, vibrant networks, and a lot of knowledge and creativity.

As designers, we get to be part of that. Graphic design lets us move between topics, communities, and stories. It's a way of learning about the world.

When you work locally, you get to engage deeply. I love seeing our work out in the neighborhood. I love being a participant in the place where I live. That brings me joy. Not everyone wants that, but it's about finding the right scale for yourself. The right kind of engagement that feels meaningful in your life. The studio I run with Tatiana is very much tied to teaching. It was formed as a response, but it's also a research platform. So the kind of work we do isn't about scaling up or becoming commercial—it's about staying responsive. Staying connected.

There is a rising anxiety for young designers, especially when there is sometimes a gap between wanting to build a practice to address social concerns and trying to get a job that has no relationship to that but only for survival. Can you share some of your experiences in dealing with this dilemma?

I know saying this may bring you more anxiety, but I wanted to share with you that there's a lot of difficulties around what it means to build a practice, and it has taken a lot of time for me to figure things out.

I came to the U.S. when I was 20 and started studying landscape architecture around 2000. I worked for 10 years, then went back to school at 34. Since then, I've done a master's at RISD, another in science communication at URI, and the studio is now five years old.

It's been 25 years of aligning all the points that brought me here. I worked in large firms, mid-sized ones focused on ecology, and small ones where I learned to run a business. Each of those experiences gave me something different—whether it was working with deadlines, learning about systems thinking, or how to talk to clients and contractors.

Tatiana had a similar path. She ran a studio in Bogotá before coming to RISD, then worked in a couple of studios in Boston before we started this practice together.

So my advice is: breathe. It takes time to build a practice, to develop relationships, and to grow your voice. Yes, you can be responsive. But give yourself time to gain experience and understand how the design world operates.

If you're not sure where to start, try different kinds of environments and jobs. Work in a non-profit. Try a large firm. Each place will shape you in a different way. The important thing is to keep working. When you work, you apply what you learned, but you also learn what you didn't expect. You figure out how your participation in the world fits. The problem is when we stop working, then we lose that momentum.